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ABSTRACT
        Perhaps writing is equated with process. But, there are too
many complicating factors that make it difficult to evaluate the success or
failure of prewriting and drafting assignments--the process and the value of
each step is different for each individual. By teaching students to recognize
the cultural contingencies of textuality, the status of the student essay as
a neutral "product" is undermined because of the heterogeneity and
multiplicity of social, sexual, historical, and economic interactions that
are not always visible in the writing process. Teaching against the process
benefits students because it performs the dual function of pulling out what
they already know about writing while simultaneously critiquing the process
that for many students has become too "cliched." Writing can be experienced
as an "emergence," as in the open model developed by Chris Langton, a
complexity theorist engaged at the Santa Fe Institute which observes
complexity in a range of disciplines. Post-It Notes can be used as a means of
demonstrating the function of the chaotic in creativity, placed in books, on
the periphery of a computer screen, on papers being written, to signify
hunches and potentialities rather than ordered ideas. As a critique of
process, Post-Its (the "petit recits"--the little narrative) achieve a
reprocessing and a remembering that is non-linear because they maintain
presence through their instability and because their material ontology
prevents assimilation into the evolving meta-structures. (Contains 11
references.) (CR)

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A Post-It Note Pedagogy:

Investigating the "petit rècit" in an Emergent Model of the Writing ~~Process~~

Last Friday, as I was reviewing the convention program I received in the mail, I realized

something that I've been overlooking for the past year. As I read the title of the session, I

understood for the first time that I'm not seeking an approach to teaching the process. Rather,

I'm experimenting with an approach to teaching writing. What I refer to in my own title as an

"Emergent Model of the Writing Process" might be more accurately phrased as an "Emergent

Model of Writing." My blind spot surprises and excites me.

Perhaps, we equate writing with process. I know that I myself have often repeated to my

students the refrain that that process is as important as the product. Some of my students,

however, have only been confused by the simplification. I integrate process into my syllabus and

try to legitimate process-directed activities with a balanced percentage of points towards the final

grade, and yet, some of my students have found my focus on process to be hypocritical. One

student made this comment on the final course evaluation: "I think that if so much emphasis is

placed on the process rather than the product--then more time should be taken to make sure we

are doing the process correctly" (Teacher Evaluation Office, Brigham Young U; 1992). I can

relate to the frustration the student felt about "doing the process correctly." As far as I can tell,

the student was not suffering from a lack of feedback--besides my own comments, there were

also peer evaluations and self-critiques. But because everyone who participated in such activities received full credit, the student remained unable to determine <u>correctness</u>. The inconsistency implicit in grading final drafts and portfolios while giving full credit to process-related assignments does seem somewhat hypocritical. Even if I approach the student's notion of correctness from the more useful perspective of <u>effectiveness</u>, the contradiction still stands. There are too many complicating factors that make it difficult to evaluate the success or failure of prewriting and drafting assignments--we know that the process and that the value of each step is different for each individual.

If you are like me, you explain the individual nature of writing processes several times over the course of the semester in an effort to counteract the limitations and the linearity implied by the process. I suspect, however, that most of my students quickly forget these qualifications. I think the idea that the writing process simplifies writing instruction is a common misconception. Ironically, it is a misconception that we often acknowledge. For example, when I first began teaching composition a couple of years ago, I read Erika Lindemann's <u>A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers</u>--a book that became invaluable to me because of its practical applications. Lindemann describes a paradox that I'm still trying to translate to my students. She writes,

> Clearly, writing is a messy business, rarely in real life as tidy as textbook
> descriptions portray it. We don't begin at step one, "Find a topic," and follow an
> orderly sequence of events to "proofread the paper. . . . prewriting and writing can
> occur at the same time. So can writing (drafting) and rewriting. . . .
> Unfortunately, this chapter must examine these processes sequentially, beginning

from a fixed point and discussing in turn three stages of composing: prewriting,

writing, and rewriting. . . . the process isn't linear but recursive. . . . (23)

The problem that Lindemann identifies in regard to her writing of the chapter also applies to

teaching. She recognizes that it is "unfortunate" that the chapter must proceed "sequentially" and

in "stages"; likewise, it is unfortunate if our teaching of writing follows in the same linear

fashion. If writing doesn't begin at step one, "Find a topic,'" then why do we teach writing as a

process? As academics, we may feel comfortable with the paradox of a recursive process, but I

suspect that our students are only confused by our mixed message that writing both is and is not

procedural. We might attempt to teach our students a specialized or qualified meaning for

process, but given the student's prior exposure to the model as well as to the word itself, we're

working against a powerful precedent. Process signifies more than mere action; the Random

House Unabridged Dictionary defines a process as a series of actions that are "systematic,"

"continuous," "formal," and "definite" (1542). The movement is always "forward" (1542).

Most of us would react strongly against such a rigid description of how we write, and yet we

cling to process because for all its inherent problems, it seems more ethical and more beneficial

than a pedagogy that values only the final product. We need not choose between the two,

however; we can create alternatives.

Distinctions between product and process quickly break down, especially in the context

of most composition classrooms where the curriculum emphasizes critical reading as well as

critical writing. By teaching our students to recognize the cultural contingencies of textuality, we

undermine the status of the student essay as a neutral "product" because of the heterogeneity and

multiplicity of social, sexual, historical, and economic interactions that are not always visible in

the writing process. The critical awareness of such contingencies reflects the changes being introduced into composition studies by postmodernism. In his introduction to <u>Reorientations:</u> <u>Critical Theories & Pedagogies</u>, Thaïs Morgan describes theorists and teachers "working within the horizon of postmodernism, poststucturalism, post-Marxism, postphenomenology, posthumanism, and postpedagogy" with the term "Posties." While the work of such posties such as Gregory Ulmer, who uses a laboratory method to teach composition, or Jennifer Gore, who assesses critical and feminist pedagogies, varies considerably from scholar to scholar, the most difficult tasks facing these postpedagogies are also the most practical. As Judith Williamson writes, "these things . . . are easy to write about at a distance from actual, diverse, unconfident, recalcitrant kids; but the question which confronts the teacher . . . is <u>how</u> to teach these things, literally how to get them across, how to make them make sense to actual living individuals" (90).

My answer to this question of "how" began as an understanding of how I myself have learned to write and what it is that I do when I write. Like some of you, I don't follow a process--at least, not a process in any real sense of the word. Instead, I experience my writing as a kind of <u>emergence</u>--I'm borrowing the metaphor from what we commonly refer to as chaos theory. If chaos has negative connotations for you, you're not alone. Even critics who study chaos theory often employ the term <u>complexity</u> to distinguish the theory from "popular books on chaos and fractals" (Jencks 10). Katherine Hayles--in her introduction to the anthology <u>Chaos and Order:</u> <u>Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science</u>--explains that <u>chaos</u> "has now become so thoroughly deprofessionalized that its use is regarded as a signal that one is in the presence of a dilettante rather than an expert" (2). Regardless of its name, complexity offers substantial insight

into composition. William Paulson, in his essay "Literature, Complexity, Interdisciplinarity,"

deconstructs Cartesian reasoning that separates thought from language. Cartesian reasoning sets

"forth principles for obtaining certain knowledge by reducing problems to simple, self-evident

components and linking these in a linear chain of reasoning" (37). Is this not the same method

implicit in the writing process? Does it not reduce the problems of writing to "simple, self-

evident components" linked in a "linear chain of reasoning"? Paulson emphasizes the

incompatibility of such a method with the study of language by citing Jean Paulhan's argument

"that in confronting the commonplaces of rhetoric, where thought and language fuse, neither the

mind's separation from its objects nor the reduction to simplicity are possible" (37). If we accept

that the mind is inextricable from its object--in this case, writing--how do we define the process?

Creating a process out of the activity of writing necessitates a thought/language split rendering

artifice and mental abstraction. To certain extent, such abstraction is inevitable--especially, if we

analogize the observation of the phenomena of composition to Heisenberg's uncertainty

principle. However, if we understand writing as emergence, we can more easily resist the

habitual dichotomy between thought and language that occurs when we arrest the dynamic of

writing with procedural logic.

One of the ways in which to understand emergence is through what Paulson identifies as

"self-organization from noise" where noise stands as a representation of disorder (46). He

writes,

> As a schema of cognition, self-organization from noise describes situations in
>
> which knowledge is but partial, the ignorance of codes bound up with the
>
> presence of information. If the phenomena that we identify as emotions and ideas

are truly emergent with respect to the physiological interactions of brain cells,

then even complete knowledge of the brain at the neuronal level would not

explain the mental level. The certainties of reductionism simply are not available.

(46)

Using Paulson's schema, I think I begin to recognize the condition in which most of my students

find themselves--knowledge is "partial" and there are many hidden codes affiliated with the

information present. More importantly, Paulson's schema does not solve the problem. The link

between knowledge at the neuronal level and knowledge at the mental level cannot be explained

through any reductive formula because it only occurs due to the multiplicity of physiological

interactions functioning in an indeterminate and unpredictable fashion. We can only observe and

identify some of smaller pieces but we don't know how the pieces combine to form an organized

thought. Thoughts emerge in the same manner as phase changes in natural systems such as the

dynamic jump in order that occur as water changes to ice. Because of the variety and complexity

of the factors influencing the phase change, order emerges from chaos.

Admittedly, the language of Paulson's schema is far too erudite for most of our freshman.

However, there are versions of the same concept written for the non-expert, and many of these

have the classroom advantage of approaching complexity from the perspective of disciplines

other than literary theory. Charles Jencks's <u>Architecture of the Jumping Universe</u>, for example,

explains postmodernism as the cultural manifestation of the concept of emergence. Using

architecture as his primary examples, Jencks summarizes twentieth-century developments in

science and quantum physics and reveals their manifestations in politics, economics, ecology,

and landscaping. Margaret Wheatley's <u>Leadership and the New Science</u> makes applications of

emergence to business administration, and James Gleick's popular Chaos provides a very accessible explanation of chaos theory for the lay audience. From the perspective of teacher, the "deprofessionalization" of chaos described by Hayles becomes an advantage rather than a disadvantage, and although the risk of over-simplification is ever-present, the availability of readable materials enables the students to participate in the creation of a metaphor that will teach against the writing process without replacing it.

Teaching against the process benefits students because it performs the dual function of pulling upon what they already know about writing while simultaneously critiquing the process that for many students has become too clichéd. This approach inscribes as it subverts. Also, if I borrow the term "defamiliarization" from the Russian formalists, the change in nomenclautre introduced by the new metaphor helps students to question "our automatic acceptance of these ideas" (Richter 723). By the time students reach the university, the process has either enabled them as writers or it has taught them how to circumvent it. I remember writing intentionally sloppy drafts so that I could demonstrate substantial improvement for the final essay--my strategy worked. It wasn't until my teachers stopped requiring me to follow the process that my writing truly improved. Because I feel that my function as a writing mentor is as significant as my role of instructor, I often find myself apologetic when teaching the method.

In order to represent the manner I in which I write and to also provide some type of open model my students could learn from, I've started using a diagram of emergence developed by Chris Langton, a complexity theorist engaged at the Santa Fe Institute which observes complexity in a range of disciplines. It "shows local variables interacting together at the bottom, [the microscopic] or object-level, and the sudden emergence of a global [macroscopic] structure

above it, at the meta-level. This holistic entity at the top, the emergent property, then feeds back on the local variables" (qtd. in Jencks 60-61). Unlike the schema explained by Paulson, Langton's model of emergent evolution represents in a visual fashion the jumps in order and design that result from the interaction of chaotic variables. As I interpret this diagram for my students, we identify a wide variety of variables interacting at the microscopic level. Besides the usual stages of the writing process which we include as exercises that encourage local interaction, we also identify other affiliative variables such as gender, culture, history, personal ritual, etc. Here again, the model provides an opportunity to reiterate the writing process while also confronting its weaknesses. The upward linearity is balanced by feedback loops, demonstrating how even those interactions which do not make the jump to a fully realized, emergent essay can become valuable materials for the creation of new lower-order structures. Once the students understand that it is a heterogeneity and multiplicity of variables that increase the potential of emergence, they also understand the rationale behind the all of the different types of classroom interactions--homework, writing groups, lab activities, etc.

Another technique that I employ in my classes in order to illustrate the concept of noise and the interaction of that noise with other variables at the object-level is the use of Post-It Notes. I began using them in class as a means of demonstrating the function of the chaotic in my own creativity. I know I'm not unique in letting them invade my life--they've become very ubiquitous. I use them in books to mark passages about which I have a question or an idea that I suspect might become important for a paper. If I'm able to articulate the idea, I'll write it on the little piece of paper; if I'm working on another task and I suddenly find a connection that I'd otherwise forget, again I'll use a Post-It Note. Often I'll find different colors of Post-Its for

different papers I'm working on. The periphery of my computer screen is plastered with them. In general, I save them for the thoughts that don't fit in. I don't use them to annotate an article or to brainstorm; rather, they are specifically for that element of writing that defies systematization. They signify hunches and potentialities rather than ordered ideas--sometimes, a blank Post-It on a page reminds me to reconsider a passage because I intuited something about it for which I didn't yet have language. My students have required very little incentive to start using them, and very quickly, usually after the very first essay assignment they begin to understand the chaotic nature of these fragments and the multiple ways in which they might be integrated into their writing. Even the brand name has become significant to us, these little yellow squares of paper are, quite literally, post-IT, post-product, and post-process. In the aptly titled "Note on the Meaning of 'Post'," Jean-François Lyotard adds to the "sense of simple succession" and of "diachronic sequence" a "procedure in 'ana': a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis" (Postmodern Explained 80). By highlighting the significance of the prefix in its critical sense, the students come to understand how the Post-It critiques the ontological notions of writing as an "it," as an artifact. Because Post-Its can be removed and reapplied to another context, they defy the stasis and permanency of the text-as-product freeing them for participation and interaction. And as a critique of process, Post-Its achieve a reprocessing and a remembering that is non-linear because they maintain presence through their instability and because their material ontology prevents assimilation into the evolving meta-structures.

Consequently, the critical function of such a pedagogical model is both deconstructive and counter-destructive. As Lyotard postulates, the crisis of postmodern culture--the "incredulity

toward metanarratives" (<u>Postmodern Condition</u> xxiv)--does not destroy the grand truths of the

modernist paradigm. Rather, the power of this paradigm:

> is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements . . . . Conveyed within
>
> each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the
>
> intersection of many of these. . . . the future falls less within the province of a
>
> Newtonian anthropology . . . than a pragmatics of language particles. There are
>
> many different language games--a heterogeneity of elements. (xxiv)

Thus, "incredulity" does not equal "disenchantment." As metanarratives decompose, they defer

veridiction to "clouds of narrative language elements" in the manner of clouds of electrons.

Thus, "local interaction" replaces the totalitarian hegemony of master narratives. According to

Lyotard, the smaller units of language become a means for innovation: "the little narrative [petit

rècit] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention" (<u>Postmodern Condition</u> 60). As

in Paulson's model of cognition and Langton's diagram of emergent evolution, Lyotard's

description of a pragmatics of language particles locates emergence at the site of maximum

complexity. The <u>petit rècit</u>, the Post-It Note, in its interaction with other particles in a variety of

language games thus becomes a practical and ethical model for the instruction of composition. In

many ways, the type of emergence this model suggests restores mystery to the creative

imagination as understood by Coleridge as a power that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order

to recreate. . . . It is essentially <u>vital</u>" (qtd. in Jencks 306).

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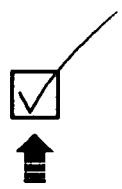
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